Review
Reviewed Work(s): A Band of Prophets: The Vanderbilt Agrarians After Fifty Years by William C. Havard and Walter Sullivan
Review by: John Yow
Source: *The Georgia Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 66, No. 3 (Fall, 1982), pp. 407-408

*A Band of Prophets: The Vanderbilt Agrarians After Fifty Years.* Edited with an Introduction by William C. Havard and Walter Sullivan. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982. Pp. x, 190. Frontispiece. $12.95.)

*A Band of Prophets* is the record of a symposium celebrating the golden anniversary of the publication of *I'll Take My Stand,* the Agrarian manifesto of 1930. The symposium took place at Vanderbilt in the fall of 1980, and this volume presents, in addition to its introduction, the six principal papers delivered at the sessions, together with an edited transcript of the panel discussion among the surviving contributors to *I'll Take My Stand.* In their introductory essay, Vanderbilt professors Havard and Sullivan sketch the history of the remarkable book under examination, offer thumbnail biographies of the twelve southerners who produced it, and set the tone for the essays to come: "seen in retrospect *I'll Take My Stand* is widely perceived today not as a nostalgic look backward, but as a forward-looking, even prophetic book."

According to the schema set forth by the editors, the first two essays, Charles P. Roland's "The South of the Agrarians" and John Shelton Reed's "For Dixieland: The Sectionalism of *I'll Take My Stand,*" provide "the historical background and cultural context out of which the Agrarians proceeded." While Reed's essay is the weakest of the six (probably because he drew the dullest assignment), Roland's paints a vivid picture of the South the Agrarians inherited and tried to preserve: the pre-Progressive South of Yellow Dog Democrats, old-time religion, and the cultural "deprivation" that prompted Mencken's sobriquet "Sahara of the Bozart"—in short, a South still free from the commitment to industrial and material progress "at whatever cost to other values."

The next two essays, Lewis Simpson's "The Southern Republic of Letters and *I'll Take My Stand*" and Robert B. Heilman's "Spokesman and Seer: The Agrarian Movement and European Culture," study *I'll Take My Stand* as literature within the context of "the broader and more ancient European culture." Making effective reference to the correspondence among Tate, Davidson, and Ransom which preceded the writing of *I'll Take My Stand,* Simpson reveals the "true motive" behind the Agrarian document: "By transforming the South into a symbol of a recovered society of myth and tradition, they would assert the community and spiritual authority of men of letters and make whole the fragmented realm of mind and letters." For his part, Heilman offers a useful retrospective of England's literary protest against industrialism and unbridled capitalism, a protest which rang out even a century before the Industrial Revolution. The considerable "prescience" of *I'll Take My Stand,* he concludes, derives from its place

in "a strong, nonlocalized tradition of dissent against the commercial, and then the industrial, dogma of well-being."

Ironically, the best piece in the volume has nothing to do with agrarianism. George Core, in "Agrarianism, Criticism, and the Academy," concentrates instead upon Ransom's, Tate's, and Warren's development of the New Criticism and their effort to establish literary criticism, *per se,* as an academic pursuit. Though a victory for literature and for literary study, this has had unforeseen consequences. Core notes that not only do critics and scholars now get along "all too well" in the university, but they have also brought the writer into the faculty. The unhappy result has been "the institutionalization of literature." The final essay of the volume, Louis Rubin's *"I'll Take My Stand*: The Literary Tradition," completes what Heilman's began. Rubin examines not just the English but also the American literary context to which *I'll Take My Stand* belonged and asserts that "the Agrarian venture was part and parcel of the overall protest of thoughtful people against the unchecked disintegrative forces in Western industrial life." But because of the Agrarians' attachment to the South, a concrete and potent symbol, their statement enjoyed "the fusion of knowledge and feeling that characterizes the poetic imagination."

The panel discussion, featuring Lyle Lanier, Andrew Lytle, and Robert Penn Warren and moderated by Cleanth Brooks, is a disappointment. The sense of spontaneity is inevitably lost, and in addition, though the participants make cogent points, they seem not to listen to each other, so that the effect is rather a sequence of monologues than a lively conversation. Enough caviling, though. *A Band of Prophets* is a worthy volume, a credit to the Agrarians, to the L.S.U. Press, and to the symposium's organizers and participants.

JOHN YOW
*University of Georgia*